

# ISOTHERMAL REGIONAL HUMAN SERVICE TRANSPORTATION COORDINATION PLAN



**Approved by Rutherford County:**  
**Approved by Polk County:**  
**Approved by McDowell County:**  
**Endorsed by Isothermal RPO:**

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## Executive Summary

The Isothermal Region has experienced rapid changes in the past few years. The manufacturing sector of the economy has been especially hard hit with little on the horizon to replace the jobs that have been lost. More of the region's growth is tied directly to our lower cost of living than the larger urban areas (Charlotte, Greenville-Spartanburg, and Asheville). Simultaneously we are also becoming a retirement destination. Lured here by majestic mountain views, a temperate climate, and our relatively low cost of living retirees are changing the dynamics of our rural counties and small towns.

All of these factors have unique transportation challenges. Retirees need extra support as they age; commuters are deeply impacted by fluctuations in the price of gasoline. These new factors compounded with residents seeking fewer local jobs will cripple our existing transit systems unless a plan for action is put into place.

This document will help area Transit agencies maximize efficiency through better coordination and improve the levels of service they provide. It also includes some "down the road" ideas for future regional and local service to meet the needs of a changing region. Similar plans are being developed by RPOs (Rural Planning Organizations) across all the rural regions of North Carolina. These tools will be effective in meeting today's transportation challenges and better preparing this region's transit providers for an ever changing tomorrow.

The planning process identified opportunities for efficiencies through coordination, as well as improved marketing to increase utilization of existing services. This was especially apparent in car and van pooling, as well as the development of park and ride lots throughout the Study Area. It also identified logical linkages with existing transit services to help create a truly regional system.

The recommendations for new services include both commuter and traditional demand-response services. For example, the US 74 Corridor between Columbus and Forest City could carry scheduled bus service to link up with Gastonia and Charlotte Area Transit System fixed-route services. The Interstate 40 corridor in McDowell County could also utilize service to reach jobs in the greater Asheville and Hickory areas.

This plan makes reasonable recommendations for new services to meet the identified needs of a variety of populations. When implemented it will provide a range of options to help residents and workers in the Study Area travel for their daily needs.



## **Section 1: Purpose and Background of Coordination Plan**

The purpose of this plan is to ensure that Federal requirements regarding coordination are satisfied as well as to assist the Isothermal region in its continuing efforts to develop an efficient and effective transit service network.

### ***1.1 Background***

The Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) created a requirement that a locally-developed, coordinated public transit/human service planning process and an initial plan be developed by 2007 as a condition of receiving funding for certain programs directed at meeting the needs of older individuals, persons with disabilities and low-income persons. Plans must be developed through a process that includes representatives of public, private, and non-profit transportation and human service providers, as well as the general public. Complete plans, including coordination with the full range of existing human service transportation providers, are required by Federal Fiscal Year 2008.

The North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT), in partnership with the Isothermal Rural Planning Organization (IRPO) and interested stakeholders, has developed a regional coordinated plan that meet the requirements of SAFETEA-LU and the Federal Coordinating Council on Access and Mobility (CCAM). While at a minimum projects funded under the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) formula programs for Sections 5310, 5316 and 5317 must be derived from a coordinated plan, the coordinated plans will incorporate activities offered under other programs sponsored by Federal, State and local agencies. These programs would include as appropriate FTA's Section 5307 and 5311 programs, as well as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Workforce Investment Act (WIA), Vocational Rehabilitation, Medicaid, Community Action (CAP), Independent Living Centers, and Agency on Aging (AoA) programs among others.

Development and content of coordinated plans are intended to be specific to the needs and issues of each transit provider. The coordinated plans will be developed to address intra- and inter-regional needs and issues, and in a manner that allows the providers, concurrent with regional Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) updates, to directly update the regional coordinated plan. Further, the coordinated plan will be developed in a manner that allows the Rural Planning Organization (RPO) to adapt and expand the plan to incorporate programs and initiatives specific to the region.



The coordinated plans development will, at a minimum:

- Assess and document transportation needs in each region for individuals with disabilities, older adults, and persons with limited incomes;
- Inventory available services in each region and identify areas of redundancy and gaps in service;
- Identify and document restrictions on eligibility for funding;
- Identify and document short- and long-range strategies in each region to address the identified gaps in service, including mobility management strategies;
- Identify and document technological resources currently available and appropriate for coordination of transportation services;
- Identify and document coordination actions in each region to eliminate or reduce duplication in services and strategies for more efficient utilization of resources; and
- Document and prioritize implementation strategies to increase coordination of transportation services in each region.

## **1.2 Planning Process**

The regional coordination plans are intended to meet the requirements of SAFETEA-LU, and the guidance detailed in the Federal Register Notice dated March 29, 2007 entitled, "Elderly Individuals and Individuals With Disabilities, Job Access and Reverse Commute, New Freedom Programs: Final Circulars" effective May 1, 2007. The development of the Isothermal regional plan involved three basic steps:

1. Developing an inventory of services and a sense of transportation needs.
2. Development of strategies and actions.
3. Development of the regional plan document.



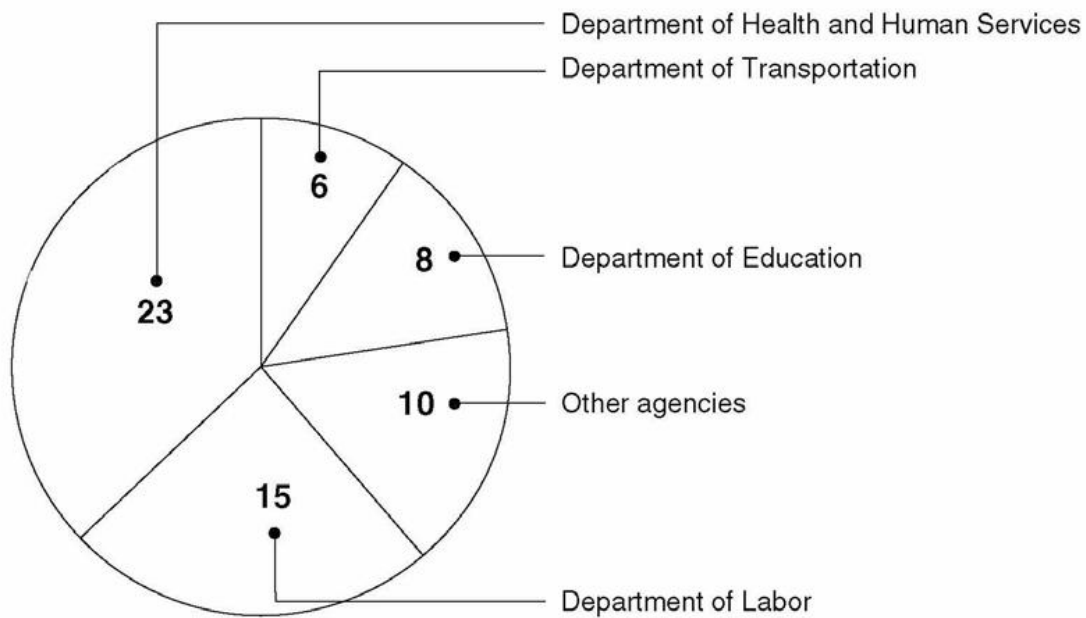
## 1.3 Funding Barriers to Coordination

One area of common concern to all regions is the role of federal and state funding in promoting coordination. In this regard, this section analyzes to what extent federal funds inhibit coordination. Included in this discussion is a brief review of important transportation funding programs and associated regulations that could affect coordinated transit. As will be seen, these programs do not restrict coordination through regulations. However, there are practical and programmatic issues that make coordination challenging but not insurmountable.

### 1.3.1 Regulatory Review

In June of 2003, the US General Accounting Office (GAO) issued a study on Federal transportation funding and coordination entitled *Transportation—Disadvantaged Populations*. The study reported that there were sixty-two funding programs for transportation. Of those, sixteen are most regularly used for public transportation with six from the USDOT through the Federal Transit Administration (FTA). See Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Sources of Federal Transportation Funds**



**Source:** *Transportation-Disadvantaged Populations*, Figure 1, page 9, USGAO, June 2003.



1. Transitional Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) provides assistance to families with children. Such assistance can include help in funding transportation needs.
2. Vocational Rehabilitation targets persons with disabilities and provides a variety of vocational services including transportation.
3. Medicaid assists people with accessing medical services including transportation to such services.
4. Head Start assists pre-school children with a variety of services including education readiness, health care, and transportation to/from such services.
5. Grants for Supportive Services and Senior Centers assists in developing services for older people which include nutrition services, senior centers, and transportation.
6. Workforce Investment Act (WIA) Adults provides job skill training services as well as transportation to/from such services.
7. WIA Youth provides job skill training services to youth as well as transportation to/from such services.
8. WIA Displaced Workers provides job skill training services as well as transportation to/from such services.
9. Program for Native Americans (under Older Americans Act) provides a variety of social service funding (e.g., nutrition and caregiver services) for Native Americans.
10. Senior Community Service Employment program provides work opportunities for older Americans.

In addition, these six US DOT programs were listed among the top human service transportation funding programs:

1. Capital Grants (Section 5309)
2. Urbanized Area Formula Program (Section 5307)
3. Non-urbanized Area Formula Program (Section 5311)
4. Job Access and Reverse Commute (Section 5316)
5. Over-the-Road Bus Program (Section 3038)
6. Transportation for Elderly and Persons with Disabilities (Section 5310)

Since the 2003 GAO study, the "New Freedom" program was enacted. The New Freedom program (Section 5317) is intended to provide operating and capital assistance to services that go beyond ADA complementary paratransit requirements.





## **1.4 GENERAL PROGRAM INFORMATION**

FTA Sections 5310, 5316, and 5317 Programs require that projects be derived from a locally developed CPT-HSTP. This chapter discusses the specific goals, who can apply, examples of eligible projects, potential funding, and the Designated Recipient (DR) for the three programs.

For each program, FTA will publish the annual apportionment in the Federal Register following the enactment of the annual DOT appropriations act. Funds are available during the FY of apportionment plus two additional years. For example, funds apportioned in FY 2006 are available until the end of FY 2008 (September 30, 2008).

FTA will add any unobligated funds remaining at the end of the period of availability to the next year's program apportionment and will reapportion the funds among all the states.

### **1.4.1 Elderly Individuals & Individuals with Disabilities (Section 5310)**

#### Goal

The Section 5310 program was established in 1975 as a discretionary capital assistance program. In cases where public transit was inadequate or inappropriate, the program awarded grants to private non-profit organizations to serve the transportation needs of elderly persons and persons with disabilities. FTA (then the Urban Mass Transportation Administration (UMTA)) apportioned the funds among the States by formula for distribution to local agencies, a practice made a statutory requirement by the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA). In the early years of the program, many of the subrecipient non-profit agencies used the vehicles primarily for transportation of their own clients. Funding for the Section 16(b)(2) program, as it was then known, ranged between \$20635 million annually until the passage of ISTEA, when it increased to the \$50660 million range. ISTEA also introduced the eligibility of public agencies under limited circumstances to facilitate and encourage the coordination of human service transportation. Increasingly, FTA guidance encouraged and required coordination of the program with other Federal human service transportation programs. In lieu of purchasing vehicles, acquisition of service in order to promote use of private sector providers and coordination with other human service agencies and public transit providers was made an eligible expense under ISTEA. Other provisions of ISTEA introduced the ability to transfer flexible funds to the program from certain highway programs and the flexibility to transfer funds from the Section 5310 program to the rural and urban formula programs.

The Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA21) enacted in 1998, reauthorized the Section 5310 program. TEA21 increased the funding levels for the Section 5310 program but made no significant program changes. In 2005, Congress enacted SAFETEA-LU. SAFETEA-LU introduced the requirement that projects funded with 5310 funds be derived from a locally developed, coordinate public transit-human services transportation plan; removed the flexibility that funds can be transferred to Section 5311 for Section 5311 program purposes during the fiscal year apportioned, if



funds were not needed for Section 5310 program purposes; introduced a seven State pilot program that allows selected States to use up to one-third of the funds apportioned to them for operating assistance; and allowed transfers to Section 5307 or 5311, but only to fund projects selected for Section 5310 program purposes.

Title 49 U.S.C. 5310 authorizes the formula assistance program for the special needs of elderly individuals and individuals with disabilities. FTA refers to this formula program as "the Section 5310 program." FTA, on behalf of the Secretary of Transportation, apportions the funds appropriated annually to the States based on an administrative formula that considers the number of elderly individuals and individuals with disabilities in each State. These funds are subject to annual appropriations.

Title 49 U.S.C. 5310(a)(1) authorizes funding for public transportation capital projects planned, designed and carried out to meet the special needs of elderly individuals and individuals with disabilities.

Title 49 U.S.C. 5310(a)(2) provides that a State may allocate the funds apportioned to it to:

1. a private non-profit organization, if public transportation service provided by State and local governmental authorities under Section 5310(a)(1) is unavailable, insufficient, or inappropriate; or
2. a governmental authority that:
  - a. is approved by the State to coordinate services for elderly individuals and individuals with disabilities; or
  - b. Certifies that there are not any non-profit organizations readily available in the area to provide the special services.

The code assigned to the Section 5310 program in the Catalogue of Federal Domestic Assistance is 20.513.

### **1.4.2 Job Access and Reverse Commute (JARC) Program (Section 5316)**

#### Goal

The goal of the 5316 Program is to improve access to transportation services to employment and employment-related activities for welfare recipients and eligible low income individuals and to transport residents of urbanized areas and non-urbanized areas to suburban employment opportunities. Toward this goal, the FTA provides financial assistance for transportation services planned, designed, and carried out to meet the transportation needs of eligible low-income individuals, and of reverse commuters regardless of income. The program requires coordination of federally assisted programs and services in order to make the most efficient use of federal resources.

#### Examples of Projects

Funds from the 5316 program are available for capital, planning, and operating expenses that support the development and maintenance of transportation services designed to transport low-income individuals to and from jobs and activities related to their employment and to support reverse commute projects.



Eligible projects may include, but are not limited to capital, planning, and operating assistance to support activities such as:

- Late-night and weekend service
- Guaranteed ride home service
- Shuttle service
- Expanding fixed-route public transit routes
- Demand-responsive van service
- Ridesharing and carpooling activities
- Transit-related aspects of bicycling (such as adding bicycle racks to vehicles to support individuals who bicycle a portion of their commute or providing bicycle storage at transit stations)
- Local car loan programs that assist individuals in purchasing and maintaining vehicles for shared rides
- Promotion, through marketing efforts, of the:
  - Use of transit by workers with non-traditional work schedules
  - Use of transit voucher programs by appropriate agencies for welfare recipients and other low-income individuals
  - Development of employer-provided transportation such as shuttles, ridesharing, carpooling
  - Use of transit pass programs and benefits under Section 132 of the Internal Revenue Code of 1986
  - Supporting the administration and expenses related to voucher programs
  - Acquiring GIS tools
  - Implementing ITS, including customer trip information technology
- Integrating automated regional public transit and human service transportation information, scheduling, and dispatch functions
- Deploying vehicle position-monitoring systems
- Subsidizing the costs associated with adding reverse commute bus, train, carpool van routes or service from urbanized areas and nonurbanized areas to suburban work places
- Subsidizing the purchase or lease by a non-profit organization or public agency of a van or bus dedicated to shuttling employees from their residences to a suburban workplace
- Facilitating the provision of public transportation services to suburban employment opportunities
- Supporting new mobility management and coordination programs among public transportation providers and other human service agencies providing transportation.
- Mobility management activities may include:
  - Promotion, enhancement, and facilitation of access to transportation services, including the integration and coordination of services for individuals with disabilities, older adults, and low-income individuals



- Support for short-term management activities to plan and implement coordinated services
- Support of state and local coordination policy bodies and councils
- Operation of transportation brokerages to coordinate providers, funding agencies and customers
- Provision of coordination services, including employer-oriented Transportation Management Organizations and Human Service Organizations customer-oriented travel navigator systems and neighborhood travel coordination activities such as coordinating individualized travel training and trip planning activities for customers
- Development and operation of one-stop transportation traveler call centers to coordinate transportation information on all travel modes and to manage eligibility requirements and arrangements for customers among supporting programs; and
- Operational planning for the acquisition of intelligent transportation technologies to help plan and operate coordinated systems inclusive of GIS mapping, GPS, coordinated vehicle scheduling, dispatching and monitoring technologies as well as technologies to track costs and billing in a coordinated system and single smart customer payment systems (acquisition of technology is also eligible as a standalone capital expense).

#### Funding

SAFETEA-LU authorized \$602 Million (FY 05 to FY 09) for the 5316 Program. FTA will apportion funds as follows:

- Sixty percent of the funds shall be distributed among designated recipients in urbanized areas with a population of 200,000 or more, in the ratio that the number of eligible low-income individuals and welfare recipients in each such urbanized area bears to the number of eligible low-income individuals and welfare recipients in all such urbanized areas
- Twenty percent of the funds shall be distributed among the states, in the ratio that the number of eligible low-income individuals and welfare recipients in urbanized areas with a population of less than 200,000 in each state bear to the number of eligible low-income individuals and welfare

### **1.4.3 New Freedom Program (Section 5317)**

#### Goal

The goal of the New Freedom Formula Grant Program is to provide additional tools to overcome existing barriers facing Americans with disabilities seeking integration into the workforce and full participation in society. Lack of adequate transportation is a primary barrier to work for individuals with disabilities. Only 60% of persons with disabilities (between the ages of 16 and 64) are employed, according to the 2000 Census. Section 5317 seeks to reduce barriers to transportation services and expand the transportation mobility options available to people with disabilities beyond the requirements of the ADA. The ADA includes access to certain transportation services as a right. The New Freedom program is not intended to fund such services.



### Examples of Projects

Section 5317 Program funds are available for capital and operating expenses that support new public transportation services beyond those required by the ADA and new public transportation alternatives beyond those required by the ADA designed to assist individuals with disabilities with accessing transportation services, including transportation to and from jobs and employment support services.

For the purpose of the New Freedom Program, "new" service is any service or activity that was not operational on August 10, 2005, and did not have an identified funding source as of August 10, 2005, as evidenced by inclusion in the Transportation Improvement Plan (TIP) or the State Transportation Improvement Plan (STIP). In other words, if not for the New Freedom Program, these projects would not have consideration for funding and proposed service enhancements would not be available for individuals with disabilities.

### New Public Transportation Services Beyond the ADA

The following activities are examples of eligible projects meeting the definition of new public transportation.

- Enhancing paratransit beyond minimum requirements of the ADA. ADA complementary paratransit services can be eligible under New Freedom in several ways as long as the services provided meet the definition of "new":
  - Expansion of paratransit service parameters beyond the three-fourths mile required by the ADA
  - Expansion of current hours of operation for ADA paratransit services that are beyond those provided on the fixed-route services
  - Incremental cost of providing same-day service
  - Incremental cost of making door-to-door service available to all eligible ADA paratransit riders, but not as a reasonable modification for individual riders in an otherwise curb-to-curb system
  - Enhancement of the level of service by providing escorts or assisting riders through the door of their destination
  - Acquisition of vehicles and equipment designed to accommodate mobility aids that exceed the dimensions and weight ratings established for common wheelchairs under the ADA and labor costs of aides to help drivers assist passengers with over-sized wheelchairs
  - Installation of additional securement locations in public buses beyond what is required by the ADA
  - New "feeder" service (transit service that provides access) to commuter rail, commuter bus, intercity rail, and intercity bus stations, for which complementary paratransit service is not required under the ADA
  - Making accessibility improvements to transit and intermodal stations not designated as key stations. This may include:
    - Building an accessible path to a bus stop that is currently inaccessible, including curbcuts, sidewalks, accessible pedestrian signals or other accessible features



- Adding an elevator or ramps, detectable warnings, or other accessibility improvements to a non-key station that are not otherwise required under the ADA
- Improving signage, or wayfinding technology
- Implementation of other technology improvements that enhance accessibility for people with disabilities including ITS
- Travel training

#### New Public Transportation Alternatives Beyond the ADA.

The following activities are examples of projects that are eligible as new public transportation alternatives beyond the ADA under the New Freedom Program:

- Purchasing vehicles to support new accessible taxi, ridesharing, and/or vanpooling programs
- Supporting the administration and expenses related to new voucher programs for transportation services offered by human service providers
- Supporting new volunteer driver and aide programs. Supporting new mobility management and coordination programs among public transportation providers and other human service agencies providing transportation. Mobility management activities may include:
  - Promotion, enhancement, and facilitation of access to transportation services, including the integration and coordination of services for individuals with disabilities, older adults, and low-income individuals
  - Support for short-term management activities to plan and implement coordinated services
  - Support of state and local coordination policy bodies and councils
  - Operation of transportation brokerages to coordinate providers, funding agencies and customers
  - Provision of coordination services, including employer-oriented Transportation Management Organizations and Human Service Organizations, customer-oriented travel navigator systems and neighborhood travel coordination activities such as coordinating individualized travel training and trip planning activities for customers
  - Development and operation of one-stop transportation traveler call centers to coordinate transportation information on all travel modes and to manage eligibility requirements and arrangements for customers among supporting programs
  - Operational planning for the acquisition of intelligent transportation technologies to help plan and operate coordinated systems inclusive of GIS mapping, GPS Technology, coordinated vehicle scheduling, dispatching and monitoring technologies as well as technologies to track costs and billing in a coordinated system and single smart customer payment systems



### Funding

SAFETEA-LU authorized \$339 Million (FY 05 to FY 09) for the 5317 Program. FTA will apportion funds among the recipients by formula, based on the ratio that the number of individuals with disabilities in each such area bears to the number of individuals with disabilities in all such areas.

### Who Can Apply

There are three eligible subrecipients:

- Private non-profit organizations
- State or local governmental authority
- Operators of public transportation services including private operators of public transportation services

### How to Apply

Eligible applicants will have the opportunity to apply for funding through a competitive selection process held by the NCDOT. The projects selected must be derived from a CPT-HSTP.





## **1.5 Non-regulatory Challenges**

While regulatory factors do not prevent different social programs from sharing resources, there are practical and programmatic considerations that can make coordination challenging. Some of these are service delivery issues and others relate to administrative issues.

Service delivery related issues include special requirements imposed by certain funding streams that are unique and not common to other funding streams. For example, Head Start requires on-vehicle monitors and use of safety restraints for passengers. These requirements are not typical with general public services funded by FTA. Thus, for an operator of FTA-only funded services, transporting a Head Start client would require these additional features, creating additional expense.

Administrative-related issues refer to the documentation of the use of a funding stream's dollars. For example, Medicaid only pays for medical-related transportation. A service provider who transports the general public as well as a Medicaid traveler would need to document to Medicaid the incremental cost of the trip. This would demonstrate to Medicaid that it is paying for only its share of the service. While a cost allocation formula can overcome this, this still presents an administrative hurdle in providing shared services.

## **1.6 Conclusion**

This review found that solely on a regulatory basis, federal transportation funding does not, per se, prohibit or restrict coordination. However, some programs present service delivery and administrative issues that require creative thinking and tenacity to overcome practical and programmatic challenges to sharing resources.

## **1.7 Organization of the Document**

This regional plan has these three main parts:

*Section 2: Introducing the Isothermal Region* profiles the region's population and service providers. It also contains information regarding transit needs in the region.

*Section 3: State of Coordination* examines current efforts at human service transportation coordination and explores some of the barriers and opportunities to further coordination.

*Section 4: Coordination Strategies and Actions* provide initial ideas for the region to continue its development of coordinated transit.





## **Section 2: Introducing the Isothermal Region**

The Isothermal region consists of three counties in Western North Carolina: Polk, Rutherford, and McDowell (refer to Figure 1). This section provides a demographic and service profile of the region as well as an identification of needs.

### **2.1 Profile of Region**

The Isothermal region is comprised of three counties in Western North Carolina: Polk, Rutherford, and McDowell.

#### **Overall Population**

According to U.S. Census Bureau estimates, in 2000, the combined population of the Isothermal region was over 123,300 persons. Rutherford was the largest county in the region at 62,899 persons, while Polk County was the smallest at 18,324. Between 2000 and 2006, population in North Carolina grew by 10.3 percent. Overall, the Isothermal region grew at a much slower rate, 3.15 percent. Polk County grew by 4.92 percent, Rutherford County grew by 1.54 percent, and McDowell County grew by 3.00 percent.

#### **Elderly Population**

In 2000, 12.4 percent of North Carolina's population was 65 years and over. All counties in the Isothermal region had greater proportions of persons age 65 and over than was found statewide. Overall, the proportion of persons age 65 and over in the region was 16.13 percent. The proportion of persons age 65 and over in Polk County was 23.6 percent, one of the highest in North Carolina, with both Rutherford and McDowell Counties' proportion at 12.4 percent.

#### **Disabled Population**

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, 1.3 million persons age five and over were identified with a disability in North Carolina, representing approximately 16.9 percent of the total population. The Isothermal region had a slightly higher proportion of persons with disabilities than found statewide, 22.96 percent (28,766 persons). Rutherford County had the greatest percentage of persons with disabilities at 25.5 percent (14,687 persons), followed by Polk County at 23.6 percent (4,325), and McDowell County at 19.3 percent (9,980 persons).

#### **Persons below the Poverty Level**

In 2000, 12.3 percent of North Carolina's population was living in poverty. Two of the three Isothermal Counties had percentages less than the statewide average. Rutherford County had 13.9 percent (8513) persons living below the poverty line, with McDowell at 11.6 percent (4726), and Polk at 10.1 (1808). Drastic economic changes have taken place since the census was taken and these figures may not be a reliable baseline measure of poverty in the region.

#### **Median Household Income**

In 2000, the median household income in North Carolina was \$39,184, which is higher than all three Isothermal counties. McDowell County had the highest income level at \$37,789, followed by Polk County at \$36,259. The median income in Rutherford County was \$31,122. Again drastic economic changes have made the Census 2000 data somewhat unreliable.



### **Change in Daytime Population**

All three counties of the Isothermal Region have diverse commuting patterns. Almost 65 percent (3356 persons) of Polk County's population leaves the county for work. Polk County also leads the region in the number of workers commuting out of state for work, 18 percent (940 persons). 44.5 percent (7940 persons) of McDowell County workers leave the county daily, and Rutherford sends 43.8 percent (10815 persons) out of the county daily. Charlotte is the largest out of county destination for Rutherford and Polk Counties (1503 persons), and Asheville is McDowell County's city of choice (943 persons).

### **Demographic Summary**

The Isothermal region is experiencing drastic changes in populations. All three counties are aging rapidly, losing young families, and sending those who remain further and further to search for work. The Isothermal Region continues to become a retirement destination as shown by its increases (sometimes drastic) in retirement age residents. The Isothermal Region is also becoming bedroom communities to our rapidly expanding cities. Commuters are our greatest underserved population, with the regions rapidly aging communities posing as the regions second highest need.

## **2.2 Services**

The Isothermal region is served by three separate Transit Authorities (Rutherford County {TARC}, Polk County Transit, and McDowell County Transit). Polk and Rutherford are housed by the county and McDowell County is housed by a non-profit organization. TARC and Polk provide general public transit service with complementary ADA paratransit as well as provide direct transportation services to human service agencies. McDowell County provides direct human service transportation to its members.

- **TARC** operates a variety of services in Rutherford County, including fixed route service centered in Rutherfordton, Spindale, and Forest City with twice daily scheduled service to outlying communities. It also operates a limited demand response service to the rural areas of the county.
- **Polk County** offers demand response services for the general public, provides service to Human Service agencies in the county and bi-monthly scheduled out of county retail trip (limited in-county retail destinations).
- **McDowell County** offers selected human service and medical trips with no general public service.



### Other Transportation Services

Other agencies that currently provide their clients with transportation using in-house resources in the region include the following (this is not an all-inclusive list):

- There are two retirement communities in Polk County that run a shuttle service to transport their residents.
- Several of the larger Long Term Care facilities in region utilize their own vans to transport their residents.
- Polk and Rutherford Counties have Taxi services
- A variety of for profit and non-profit agencies/medical providers have vans and small buses.
- Churches throughout the region have a multitude of underutilized vehicles.

## **2.3 Identified Transportation Gaps and Needs**

Two key sources of information describe Isothermal's human transportation service providers as well as their needs. The first was a survey distributed specifically for this coordination plan. The second was through meetings of Isothermal human services agencies and other stakeholders conducted on November 5<sup>th</sup>, November 6<sup>th</sup>, November 7<sup>th</sup>, and November 18<sup>th</sup>.

### **2.3.1 Survey**

In addition to the statistical information provided in Section 2.2, a number of human and other service providers were surveyed to determine the nature of their services as well as factors that could help or hinder coordination. This section summarizes that survey.

In late 2008, about 25 surveys were distributed to Isothermal region service providers. The survey was distributed at the meetings and by mail with invitations to the meetings. One questionnaire was returned. The survey covered 17 areas including:

- ÉDescriptive information about provider (budget, number of vehicles, quantity of service provided)
- ÉTypes of clients and destinations served
- ÉTimes of day and days of week of service
- ÉVehicle restrictions
- ÉUse of advanced technology
- ÉAreas of interest with respect to coordination

Key observations from the survey are:

- The region is comprised of three, relatively large distinct counties.
- Varied destinations are served, but the primary issue is duplication of services
- While some coordination is used, help could be used in scheduling



### **2.3.2 Sponsored Meetings**

During the course of the project, the Isothermal Rural Planning Organization sponsored three meetings, and staff attended other healthcare related meetings. These were attended by representatives of human service agencies and transportation providers. The meetings were held to facilitate discussion about transportation issues and potential strategies to address these issues. All three meetings advanced the development of the coordination plan through the identification of transportation gaps, discussion regarding the barriers to and opportunities for coordination. Short summaries from each meeting are included in Appendix A, and the discussions at these meetings served as the basis for Sections 3 and 4 of this Plan.

## **Section 3: State of Coordination in the Region**

This section reviews issues associated with coordination in the Isothermal region and describes the efforts already under taken to coordinate as well as stated barriers to and opportunities for coordination.

### ***3.1: Regional Transportation Gaps/Barriers to Coordination***

As a result of facilitated meetings, there are numerous gaps in human service transportation within the Isothermal region. The list of gaps is not intended to be inclusive of all gaps, but the gaps identified are considered by meeting participants as the most significant and should be the focus of projects and strategies funded under the three FTA programs.

Many of the gaps in transportation for the Isothermal region stem from its size geographically and the number of remote rural areas that are difficult to serve. Transportation providers cited the long travel times to remote areas and limited resources (vehicles and revenue) contribute to these issues. The group identified several rural areas that need more service including: Bostic, Washburn, Caroleen-Avondale-Henrietta, Green Creek, and Harris communities. The concept of hidden rural poverty surfaced. Rural areas, especially in Polk County and in the more remote areas of Rutherford County, have small pockets of poverty that go unnoticed. These clusters are often members of the same family with limited ability to access basic services by transit or other means.

Several populations were considered to be underserved; the most notable of which were low and fixed income individuals just above the Medicaid threshold that need transportation to basic services. Many of these individuals are either elderly or live in the remote areas of the region. The group also felt that seniors have difficulty in getting to destinations, other than senior centers, primarily for basic needs like groceries and other non-medical services. The NC JobLink/WIA staff expressed concern for their clients, who have been through career training programs and placed into jobs, who find that transportation is a critical barrier to maintaining their employment.



The group also identified several other issues that either represents gaps or barriers to coordination. They include:

- There is no after-hours non-emergency transportation (Urgent Care)
- Need more general public transportation in McDowell County
- Improve accessibility to services in terms of a well advertised one-stop call center to help individuals identify potential service providers.
- Improve scheduling coordination between all transit agencies in western North Carolina

### **3.2: Opportunities to Coordinate**

Many opportunities for coordination were identified early in the process across all the regions, including but not limited to:

- Information on space available transportation (may be posted on a web site for all to see and know that space is available to key destinations).
- Regional vehicle maintenance to share that expense.
- Develop cost allocation formulas to encourage cooperation and coordination among transportation providers.
- Use real-time scheduling among operators in an area to utilize available capacity
- Develop Regional Vanpool program to coordinate non-emergency and work related trips out of area and to key destinations within the region (major employers, etc.)
- Creation of regional transit hubs (county-wide transfer stations, multi-modal or otherwise).



## **Section 4: Coordination Strategies and Actions**

Based on the coordination and other issues identified in Section 3, several strategies and actions were developed to advance the region's efforts to promote coordination to a higher level. "Strategy" is defined here as a general direction for a course of action, while "actions" are more specific steps in fulfillment of the given strategy. Actions will lead to "projects" which implement the actions and strategies. This regional coordination planning effort will only go to the "action" level, with projects to be developed later.

### ***4.1 Coordination Strategies***

The coordination strategies and actions were developed to address the transportation needs and issues confronting the region identified in Section 3. The primary issues and needs include:

- More service (more days, hours, geographic coverage)
- Centralized scheduling
- Address cost allocation among operators
- Contract to another agency to run a fixed route system in McDowell County
- Provide service to existing employers and coordinate with out of area service providers to better support customers
- Creation of a centralized distribution center (Regional Transit Center)
- Utilize non-traditional partners (Taxicab companies, Churches, Non-Profits, Long Term Care facilities, etc.) to provide cost effective after hours service and to provide efficient and reliable service to remote and rural areas of the county.



## 4.2 Actions

Need: Additional transit vehicles to provide additional service and reduce demand of existing fleet

Action Strategy: Apply for FTA Section 5310, 5316, and 5317 funds to help pay for additional vehicles

Action Strategy: Dedicate local revenue stream for transit services in order to allow for more reliable planning and service provision.

Need: Dedicated public lots for car pools, van pools, and scheduled bus service to pick up and drop off passengers

Action Strategy: Incorporate recommendations from Plan into local subdivision and development regulations to require or recommend provision as a part of site plan.

Action Strategy: Work with NCDOT where excess public land is made available to develop public parking lots.

Need: Awareness of existing van pool operations

Action Strategy: Place links to CATS van pool programs on municipal web sites

Action Strategy: Educate chambers of commerce, workforce development organizations, and employers about eligibility and process for area van pool programs.

Need: Van pools opportunities for workers and residents in the Study Area

Action Strategy: Apply for 5316 funds to help pay for new van pool routes.

Action Strategy: Educate employers, workforce development agencies, and chambers of commerce of availability of van pool programs

Need: Awareness of existing ride-matching web sites

Action Strategy: Place links to <http://www.sharetheridenc.org> on municipal, economic development, chamber of commerce, workforce development, and other relevant web sites

Need: Better integrate demand-response, local and express bus routes

Action Strategy: Establish drop off and pick up times for local and demand-response services that allow for seamless transfer from express bus routes

Need: New scheduled routes for crossroad communities in Rutherford County

Action Strategy: Based on initial test runs; apply for 5316 and 5317 funds to help pay for extended scheduled service to Ellenboro, Bostic, Sandy Mush, and Green Creek areas.

Action Strategy: Apply for 5316 and 5317 funds to help pay for a new scheduled route between Rutherfordton/Spindale areas and the communities in Northern Rutherford County.

Need: Fixed Route Service in McDowell County (City of Marion, US-70 Corridor)

Action Strategy: Apply for Rural General Public funding from NCDOT.

Action Strategy: Apply for 5316 and 5317 funds to help pay for new fixed route service in McDowell County.

Need: Additional services to Human Service Agencies

Action Strategy: Continue to pursue partnerships and opportunities to expand transit services to special needs populations.



## **Section 5: Considerations for Implementation**

The strategies and actions presented in Section 4 only set the stage for enhanced coordination. More is needed if those actions are to be converted into concrete steps. This section presents some ideas on how the region may go about converting actions into well-defined projects. Projects will be the steps necessary to fulfill the strategies and actions. Three areas of implementation will be addressed:

- Development of projects
- Prioritizing projects
- Carrying out projects

### ***5.1 Considerations for Developing Projects***

If the actions and strategies in section 4 are to be implemented, more concrete steps are needed. These steps or projects need, obviously, to correspond to a given strategy and action.

Some key steps in making an action into a project or projects would be:

1. Form a working group for the specific area.
2. Describe the desired end result.
3. Define the steps to achieve the end result.
4. Identify and take the first step.

#### **5.1.1 Form a Working Group**

Coordination, by definition, involves a collection of agencies or groups working toward a common end. Any effort to promote coordination needs to be achieved by mutual cooperation of the affected entities. A working group, facilitated by Isothermal RPO or another agency to tackle a given action, would be an important step in forming and executing implementation projects.

The working group might be formed based on the scope of activity to be undertaken. The working group should be composed of stakeholder agencies and with persons who are committed to finding common ground and can be counted on to attend meetings as well as to carry out assignments outside regular meetings. As with any group working together, meetings should be documented with summaries distributed to all participants as soon after the meeting as possible.





### 5.1.2 Describe the End Result

This step clearly defines the goal or objective of the working group. It answers the question, “What are we trying to do?” For example, to develop a project that “rationalizes performance and service standards,” multiple outcomes can result such as:

- ÉDevelop common standard for on-vehicle ride times
- ÉCreate service on time performance criteria and standards
- ÉEstablish common driver qualifications
- ÉEstablish common insurance requirements
- ÉDetermine vehicle maintenance requirements.

A project might address one or a combination of these outcomes. The working group would decide which of these would be best to tackle first.

### 5.1.3 Define Steps to be taken

In developing common action, it typically requires a series of small steps to achieve a given result. For example, “establish common driver qualifications” would likely not be a question of agreeing to a set of standards. Each affected agency likely has a stake in its way of doing things. As such, addressing each unique circumstance will take methodological consideration. These steps become the project’s “work program.” Using “driver qualifications” as an example, the following steps might be considered:

1. Define driver qualifications in use at each participating agency.
2. Determine the rationale for each qualification. For example, is a given qualification due to some special circumstance related to the type of riders carried?
3. Determine qualifications common to each agency. Which qualification areas are at odds? Does one agency require drivers to be 25 years of age while another 21 years?
4. Focus on areas of disagreement. For example, perhaps each agency has different age requirements, driver training regimens or drivers have ancillary duties besides driving.
5. Of the areas of disagreement, select the areas that are easiest to address.
6. Take each area in turn.

### 5.1.4 Identify and Take First Steps

Taking the first step may seem easy, but it might be the hardest one. Sometimes embarking on a difficult assignment causes procrastination. Setting deadlines, meeting dates, and making initial assignments can be helpful in avoiding first step delays.



## **5.2 Considerations for Prioritizing Projects**

There may be several projects that address a specific action, or the region may want to tackle several actions at once. Either way, a region may be faced with a number of projects it wishes to pursue. As resources tend to be limited, only so much can be done. This section provides some ideas in how competing projects may be prioritized. Developing project criteria is one way competing projects can be ranked in order of desired undertaking. Examples of criteria are:

- Degree of project contention - is this a project that is divisive and could be both time consuming and complicated to pursue? Depending on the importance of the project, it may be pursued alone or postponed in favor of easier pursuits.
- Core versus peripheral issue - is the project addressing a keystone issue or one that is relatively minor and has limited overall value? The scope of the project could dictate whether it is an action worth taking sooner or later. Generally projects with far-reaching results can have great pay-offs in advancing coordination or, if not successfully pursued, they can discourage future action.
- Time - is the project addressing an immediate and pressing issue or one that is more long term? Issues with immediate and significant impact may be more desirable than those that are long term in nature. For example, address the impact of rising fuel prices could be immediate, while addressing federal vehicle safety standards may have a longer time horizon with less tangible benefits.
- Scope of Impact - does the project impact a small inconsequential aspect of human service transportation or is more significant? The more significant the issue, the more challenging and the greater the potential rewards.
- Scope of effort - does the project tax the technical and time skills of the people involved? Would it require outside help in the form of a consultant or other outside expert? Far-reaching projects requiring significant effort may be challenging to pull off, though a successful outcome could be enormously beneficial.

## **5.3 Carrying Out Projects**

This section provides some information that may be useful as the region undertakes coordination projects. Some points to consider are:

- Look for analogous situations to the project being undertaken. It is possible some other agency has tackled the same or similar problem being addressed by the project. Some sources of information are:
- Literature from the Transportation Research Board (TRB), the Community Transportation Association of America (CTAA), the American Public Transportation Association (APTA), Easter Seals (through Project Action).
- Presentations given at conferences of the above organizations as well as at State transit associations.
- United We Ride website ó [www.unitedweride.gov](http://www.unitedweride.gov)



- Peer agencies in other regions can be a good source of information and advice. Peer agency staff could either be invited to attend a meeting in the region, or the working group might take a field trip to the peer's place of work.
- Be willing to fail and learn.
- Find people who champion finding a solution to the issue at hand.
- Consider other outside resources such as a state DOT or a consultant.

## **5.4 Project Evaluation Guidelines**

A major goal of the Coordination Plan is to establish a methodology to evaluate potential projects at the regional level so that limited resources are optimized. Based on the plan development process in the Isothermal region, the following criteria should be considered when selecting projects.

1. Capital versus Operational Assistance ó a central theme among the gaps and strategies for coordinated transportation in the Isothermal region was to simply increase service. Both capital projects and operating assistance can serve as a method for accomplishing this objective whether the project proponent is increasing the fleet size or designing a project that enhances service hours or area. Capital projects tend to be less difficult to accommodate for an annual competitive funding process because they are one-time expenditures and create capacity for the funding program in the subsequent year. However, the region should consider projects involving operating assistance in cases where the proponent has established a sustainable local source of funding and/or combined a local source with matching dollars from another federal source. These projects should compare favorably with capital requests as long as they have a defined term of no more than three years of funding.
2. Projects that enhance reliability and schedule adherence of demand response services should receive a high rating. A cost allocation formula must be defined, but trip coordination efforts (real-time or otherwise) among the providers in the region could address this issue without major increases in fleet size. There is some level of unused capacity with the vehicles that are parked while waiting on customers.



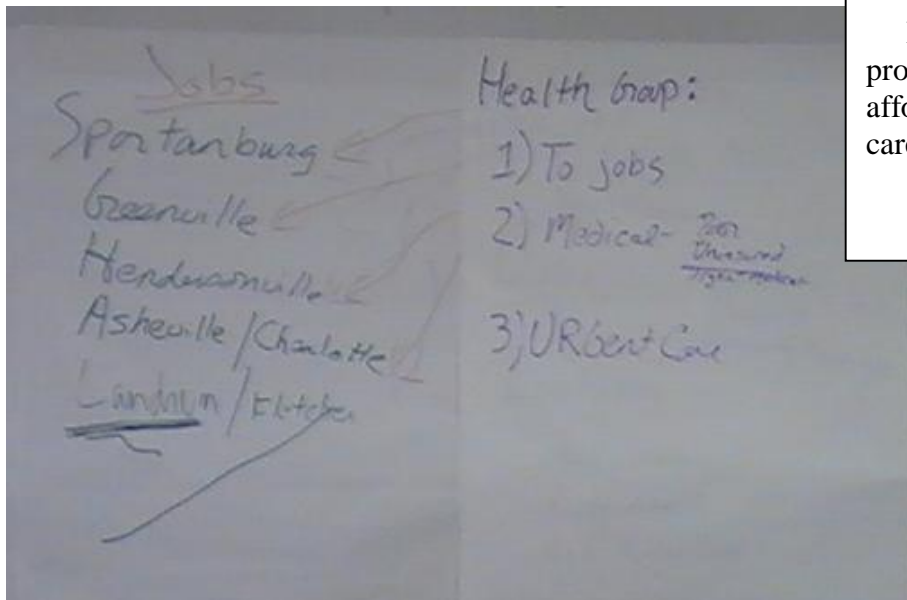
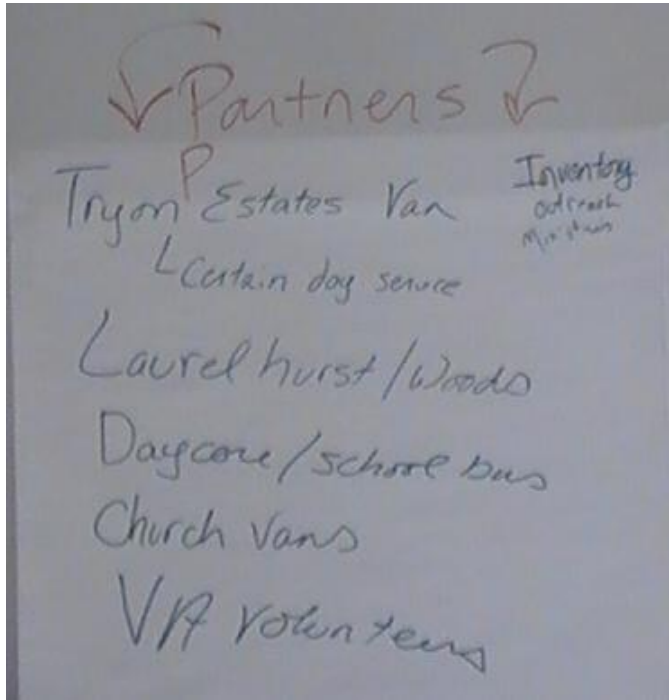
## **5.4 Project Evaluation Guidelines Continued**

3. Projects that target new rural service and, more specifically, service in McDowell County should receive favorable ratings in the evaluation process.
4. Projects that specifically target access to jobs. Employment in the Isothermal region is declining rapidly. Providing greater assistance to our current employers and assisting our current residents increase their job opportunities by providing reliable out of area service.
5. Many coordination efforts involve a perceived risk on the part of one or more agencies. For instance, the simple act of contracting out for transportation service requires an agency to relinquish control of customer service to a certain extent. Projects that essentially provide seed money for the first year of a new relationship between two agencies should be favorably considered. This type of arrangement at least removes the issue of using agency funds for what may be perceived as a risky endeavor. The project would give the contractor one year to exhibit its service capabilities and warrant use of agency funds for the arrangement in subsequent years.



## **Appendix A:**

Poster Board Discussion results



### **Polk County Workshop:**

**November 4, 2008**

### **Isothermal Community College**

Churches and retirees are a huge asset in moving people. How can we better utilize them?

Commuters and Medical Customers are often going to the same places. Can we rideshare?

We need to have a better way of communicating across County/State Lines. Human Service Providers would like to be able to see transit scheduling to make the process easier.

We need more and better data about where people are going? What kind of jobs are they leaving here for? How can we better provide service to the hidden pockets of Rural Poverty?

Non-Emergency Care is a large problem in Polk County. People can not afford ambulance; do not have access to care beyond normal working hours.



Piggybacking  
Regional Coordination  
Green River Baptist Association  
Minditico - ESL/ICC  
Fellowship Baptist

**Rutherford County Workshop**  
**November 6, 2008**  
**Rutherford County Annex**

Similar issues as Polk County however much more focused on Jobs.  
 Lack of Jobs, Lack of access to jobs, going further for jobs,

Rutherford County also has a higher percentage of urban Poverty with less rural poverty.

<u>Potential Partners</u>	
<u>Nursing Homes</u>	Where are we going?
<u>Churches</u>	
<u>Taxi</u>	Charlotte Asheville Spartanburg Shelby

Employment Transit  
 Needs assessment <sup>Commuters</sup> Lat-of town <sup>42</sup>  
 Hidden Rural Poverty <sup>44</sup>  
 - unemployed / under employed  
 - Retrained  
Urgent Care !!!  
 Regional Coordination  
After Hours!





Van Pools - Employers  
 Park + Ride  
 I.D. Clusters of Activity  
 Job Training  
 Senior Center  
 DSS - Va Rehab  
 Elected Officials  
 Customers  
 Section 8

VIA For  
 Private Providers

Schools • Partners  
 Taxi  
 Churches  
 Law Enforcement?  
 - Prison  
 Other Transit Providers  
 RATARC  
 Hickory  
 Nursing Homes

GROUP 1

- New Service - Marion  
 (2) Rest of County
- Go: Where needed  
 Shopping  
 Medical  
 } All over
- When: 6a - 6p
- Demand Response
- Deviated Fixed Route
- SEVERAL POPULATION Target to Many

GROUP 2

- Deviated Fixed Route - General Area  
 ↳ Not currently done
- Commuters → Baxter  
 ↳ After hours 300-500
- RATARC runs Fixed Route
- Cost  
Response Neutral

McDowell County Workshop; November 18, 2008-  
 Lack of General Public Transit. Improve job access.

